NEGP MONTHLY

Topic Highlighted in this Issue:

Goal 2: School Completion

High School Dropout Rates

States in this Issue:

DROPOUTS FROM THE K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

This economy is not kind to those who drop out of high school without a diploma. While finishing high school may seem difficult for some students, leaving school before earning a diploma causes them even greater problems. Their unemployment rates are high; their real earnings adjusted for cost of living have declined dramatically; one-third of female dropouts are pregnant, about to start parenting without the education or job experience to support children adequately; and an alarming percentage of dropouts make up the prison population (82 percent), costing them a promising future and society an expense that far exceeds that of a good college education.

To meet Goal 2–a high school completion rate of 90 percent–policymakers and educators need an understanding of the flip side of this goal, the dropout rate. This is a major indicator of state performance under Goal 2. Once almost impossible to determine because of varying ways used by the states to calculate dropouts, the national picture became clearer during the 1990s as more and more states began to use a similar definition of dropouts.

The bleak economic outlook for dropouts, combined with a commitment to find ways for all students to meet higher standards, have focused attention on prevention. First, policymakers needed a common definition of a dropout. Then they needed to use strategies proven effective. They also are now able to draw from lessons learned from federal and state initiatives designed specifically to address the needs of students most at risk of leaving school without a diploma.

Who Is a Dropout?

Until 1991, national school dropout statistics depended on whatever individual states (and often districts) decided to report. States still use calculations best suited for their purposes and/or

determined by state legislation, but data from 37 states and the District of Columbia now conform to the common dropout definition adopted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). A few of these states vary from the definition but have been determined to be close enough to be included (see explanation below).

Questions about the dropout rate are included in the Common Core of Data (CCD) survey which NCES sends to each district every year, and a composite estimate is drawn from the district-level data to arrive at a state dropout rate.

The common definition resulted from a collaborative process. NCES worked with representatives of state agencies, educational researchers, coordinators for CCD, and the academic community to reach a common dropout definition. It also encouraged districts to participate in the CCD survey in order to build a national database on public school dropouts, as well as many other areas.

According to the CCD definition, a dropout is an individual who:

· was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year and was not enrolled on October 1 of the current school year; or
· was not enrolled on October 1 of the previous school year although expected to be (e.g., was not reported as a dropout the year before); and
· has not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved educational program and
· does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions:
    · transfer to another public school district, private school, or state- or district-approved education program;
    · temporary school-recognized absence due to suspension or illness; or
    · death.

The CCD definition of the school year is the 12-month period beginning on October 1 and ending September 30. It includes the summer following the regular school year.

About 46 states usually report dropout data through the CCD, but only 22 of them and the District of Columbia were using the common definition as of 1995 (up from 15 in 1991 when the CCD first began collecting data on dropouts). According to a report from NCES, there was a "concern that some states may never change to the CCD definition because data collection systems are difficult (and expensive) to change, as are local administrative practices and state policies."

A new collaborative group studied this problem from a technical viewpoint, and in February 2000 it recommended a modest change to allow more states to be used to determine the national dropout rate. Most of the states that did not follow the definition had an alternative reporting calendar, usually a June-June calendar. The technical study found that accepting dropout data from these states would have only a small effect–and would add 12 states to the dropout file. NCES now will be basing the national dropout data on information submitted from 37 states.

Another state practice that does not conform to the CCD definition is to not consider students who are in adult GED programs as dropouts. The CCD definition says these students should be counted as high school dropouts. This practice eliminates six states from the national dropout file–California, Florida, Indiana, New Mexico, Oregon, and South Carolina. The other major nonconform-

ing practice–how states report summer dropouts–keeps an additional five states out of the file (Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia).

Where Are We on This Indicator?

Dropout data may be reported three ways. The *event* rate describes the proportion of students who leave school each year without completing a high school program. The *status* rate provides cumulative data on dropouts among all young adults within a specified age range, usually ages 16-24. The *cohort* rate measures what happens to a group of students over a period of time, usually drawn from longitudinal studies. Its data provide more background and contextual information on the students who drop out than do other sources of dropout statistics.

According to the latest national data, as of October 1998, about 5 of every 100 young people who were enrolled in high school in October 1997 were not in school and had not successfully completed a high school program. The actual event dropout rate is 4.8 percent. This figure gradually decreased from 1972, when the information was first collected by NCES, to 1987, dropping from 6.1 percent to the current rate of about 5 percent. It has remained relatively unchanged since then.

As to the status rate, in October 1998 about 3.9 million young adults, ages 16-24, were not enrolled in a high school program and had not completed high school. They represented 11.8 percent of the 33 million young adults of this age. This estimate parallels that of the event rate, lower than reported in the early 1970s but unchanged during the last 10 years.

However, among the states there has been considerable individual progress in bringing down the event dropout rate. Overall, according to the National Education Goals Panel 1999 report, 13 states out of the 26 contributing to the data reduced their high school dropout rates between 1992 and 1997. These included Connecticut, District of Columbia, Georgia, Iowa, Missouri, Montana, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, West Virginia, Wyoming, and Puerto Rico.

In addition, another group of states, considered the highest performing on this indicator, managed to hold the dropout rate in 1997 to 3 percent. The group includes Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, and North Dakota. On the other hand, the 1999 report found the dropout rate had increased in 10 states.

Who Drops Out?

The dropout rate is starkly sensitive to poverty and the racial/ethnic backgrounds of young people. According to NCES:

- In 1998, 12.7 percent of students from families in the lowest income bracket–the lowest 20 percent–dropped out of high school. This compares to 3.8 percent of students from middle-income families and 2.7 percent of students from families in the top 20 percent. These figures have been relatively stable since 1990.

- U.S. Census Bureau data confirm findings from longitudinal cohort studies which show a strong relationship between race/ethnicity and dropping out of high school.   The good news is that the event dropout rates of white and black students have become very similar statistically during the past 25 years–3.9 percent and 5.2 percent, respectively. The Hispanic dropout rate, however, remains much higher–at 9.4 percent.   Their status dropout rate fluctuated slightly during the 1990s, ranging between 27 and 30 percent. In 1998, 44 percent of Hispanic young adults born outside of the 50 states or the District of Columbia were high school drop-outs; more than half of these young people had never enrolled in a school in this country. In 1998, 4.1 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander young adults were status dropouts compared with 29.5 percent of Hispanics, 13.8 percent of blacks, and 7.7 percent of whites.

- In 1998, youth over the age of 18 were over-represented among the dropout figures. Appar-ently, those who stay in high school beyond the traditional age for graduation become discour-aged and are at an increased risk of dropping out. Dropout rates were highest among stu-dents ages 19 and older, but one-third of all young adults who left school between October 1997 and October 1998 were at the other end of high school–15-17-year-olds who were not yet at the typical age for completing high school.

- There is great variance by region on the event dropout rate, ranging from 6.2 percent in the West and 5.1 percent in the South to 3.8 percent in the Northeast and 3.6 percent in the Mid-west. As for status dropout rates (16-24-year-olds), they also were lower in the Midwest and Northeast. In the West, 16-24-year-olds represent 23.8 percent of the total population and account for 31 percent of all dropouts.

What Helps to Prevent Students from Dropping Out?

Since 1986, the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University has been studying and identifying effective strategies to prevent students from leaving high school before receiving a diploma. From the many initiatives and programs studied, it has distilled more than a dozen strate-gies proven to be the most effective, including:

- A continuous process of evaluating the impact of policies, practices, and structures on all students, giving special attention to diversity

- Community collaboration that provides collective support to schools and students' needs
- Professional development for teachers who work with youth at high risk of academic failure
- Family involvement and family support, starting with the early years of their children
- Early interventions for students having academic problems, alternative schooling that provides

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS
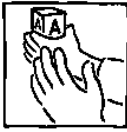
Goal 1: Ready to Learn

Goal 2: School Completion

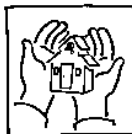**Goal 3: Student Achievement and Citizenship**

Goal 4: Teacher Education and Professional Development

Goal 5: Mathematics and Science

Goal 6: Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning

Goal 7: Safe, Disciplined and Alcohol- and Drug-free Schools

Goal 8: Parental Participation

individualized help and instruction for potential dropouts, and the use of technology to adapt instruction to students' learning styles

• Mentoring and tutoring by supportive adults

• Integration of research-based instructional and supportive strategies such as service learning, attention to multiple intelligences, and a quality guidance program.

The Dropout Prevention Center emphasizes student-centered solutions to preventing dropouts, such as peer help, after-school leadership development programs, and a comprehensive violence prevention plan that gives students daily experiences in developing positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills.

A study of 85 grants under the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program of the U.S. Department of Education produced some specific recommendations. The grants were carried out for five years, between 1990 and 1995, by school districts or community organizations. The grants were either targeted, operating as small-scale programs within schools or community-based organizations; or focused on overall restructuring in schools with a significant dropout problem. The programs had wide latitude in what they chose to do, but shared two features. They provided extra personal support for students, and they created smaller and more personal settings for students at risk of dropping out.

The study concludes that dropout-prevention programs in the future ought to emphasize:

• Alternative middle schools that provide intensive intervention, especially acceleration for students who fall behind to help them catch up with their age peers.

• Smaller, alternative high schools for students with motivation or academic potential who are considered at risk.

• GED programs for older students. Often short-term GED programs are more successful than efforts to persuade students to take the long road and obtain a regular high school diploma.

• Restructuring that focuses on improving the curriculum and instruction through staff development. Restructuring has more promise when it focuses on changing the classroom experience rather than on providing dropout-prevention services.

The researchers from Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., who conducted the study of the federal program suggest that any dropout prevention program implemented without knowing why students are dropping out "will almost surely yield weak results" and waste resources.

States that have very low dropout rates or that are improving on this indicator rely on data and on lessons from effective strategies to direct their initiatives.

IOWA

With a 3 percent dropout rate, Iowa is among the highest-performing states on this indicator. It is the result of long-term, focused investment in local efforts by the state.

Iowa uses the NCES definition of dropouts, recently moving from a mid-summer calendar year for counting to the October date. It has collected information on dropouts for many years, depending on local schools to fill out forms (formerly paper, now transitioning to electronic filing). The state does not have individual student records for tracking. Beginning in 1970, the state education department published dropout data by grade, including grades 7-12, in a separate report, but in 1992, it folded the information into the annual state condition-of-education report.

Since 1984, Iowa has had a funding process that allows local districts to raise their own property taxes for dropout prevention and services. The governor's office sets the rate for increases in school budgets, but the legislation provides a non-competitive grant strategy to give school districts an option for raising additional money targeted at dropout prevention. Currently, 205 districts are taking advantage of the option. Also, school districts can apply for additional funding from the state weighted to serve dropouts, either in district-run alternative schools or through a consortium of smaller districts that establish an alternative school together.

More than 125 different kinds of activities are being used by local districts under this effort, according to Ray Morley, director of the program at the state education department.   The policies and budget are providing more than $40 million annually to keep students in school through graduation.

The local efforts include mentoring systems for students' personal and social development, before- and after-school activities to help students with their studies, peer tutoring, student leadership activities, summer activities that maintain students' academic learning, and alternative schools.

Services to students at risk of dropping out include coordination with service agencies, outreach to families, and career and vocational education collaboration between schools and community colleges.

Morley's office maintains an Internet system for school districts on dropout prevention, posting research and information on successful initiatives. It also helps bring resources from outside of the state, both local efforts and national programs, to the annual meeting of the Iowa Association of Alternative Education.

Morley particularly praises the alternative school movement in Iowa for its role in serving students who might drop out of school. There are 94 documented alternative schools in the state.

The interest in alternative schools–most of them designed as alternative learning environments within high schools–began in the 1970s in Iowa, and the 400-member association is more than 20 years old. The association supports regional conferences for students attending alternative programs, provides mini-grants to teachers wanting to try new ideas, and organizes teams to evaluate the alternative programs for districts. "I give the association a lot of credit for why the alternatives have been successful with students and families and for linking those involved with each other," Morley says.

Some shifts are occurring in the state, however, that concerns Morley. The legislature recently changed the funding for dropout prevention to a formula grant program to serve students at risk, specifying that the money can be used for alternative schools at the high school level, school-based youth services, or dropout prevention services. The funding level will be much less than before, Morley predicts.

Moreover, the demographics are changing in Iowa. Immigrant groups, primarily Hispanic, are moving into the state. The number of students in English-language classes in the schools doubled in the 1990s, and Morley said even the staff in alternative learning environments are not as effective as they want to be in finding ways to link school and family values for culturally different students. He wants more research on the effect of poverty and cultural backgrounds on the decisions of young people to leave school.

Iowa wanted to have a zero dropout rate by the year 2000, and this is still a worthy goal, according to Morley. "Even though the minority population is growing, we have a high value on education and work, and that is helping us move toward our goal," he says.

CONTACT:
Ray Morley
Consultant
Iowa Department of Education
Grimes State Office Building
Des Moines, IA 50319
515/281-3966

GEORGIA

Multiple efforts to improve the academic achievement of potential dropouts and to provide services are largely responsible for Georgia's success at lowering its dropout rate a full percentage

point, from 9 to 8 percent, between 1995 and 1997. It is one of five states considered the most improved because of their progress in reducing the percentage of students leaving high school without earning a diploma.

Georgia changed its definition of dropouts in 1995 to conform to that used by NCES. The state gathers data on full-time students three times a year, and the October one is used to determine the dropout rate.

Three initiatives in Georgia are primarily related to the decrease in the dropout rate, according to Myra Tolbert, director of special projects/waivers at the Georgia Department of Education. Academic failure is a main reason students give for dropping out, and the Georgia approach focuses on bringing students' reading and math skills up to a level where they can make strong academic progress.

The state superintendent's emphasis on improving reading and math skills reaches into the middle grades. The Reading Challenge for grades 4-8, which builds on renewed efforts in the lower grades, is an after-school academic enrichment program staffed by a certified reading teacher. "This emphasis has really changed attitudes," says Tolbert, "because until it started few people thought about teaching reading skills in the middle grades."

Georgia also organized a collaborative process at the state level, Family Connection, which provides funding to local communities. It is based on the belief that many students need coordinated support to stay in school. All major state-level departments, including education, adolescent health, labor, and juvenile justice, have a joint collaborative planning process to encourage local communities to combine resources and avoid duplication. Started by former Governor Zell Miller, the program gives local communities planning grants to establish collaborative strategies, with the funding decreasing gradually as communities learn to pool resources more efficiently. "It is a way for communities to say to students and their families that education is important, and we are going to provide you with the support necessary to become successful in school," says Tolbert.

New legislation will move a state-financed alternative school program away from an emphasis on students with discipline problems to one that focuses on students who are academically behind. All 180 school districts are now expected to provide an alternative learning environment which provides smaller pupil-teacher ratios (15 to 1 is recommended), more individualized instruction, and innovative teaching. Local districts can decide the structure for the alternative–from a one-semester intensive program, for example, to

an option to stay in the setting through the 12th grade.

CONTACT:

Dr. Myra Tolbert
Director of Special Projects/Waivers
Georgia Department of Education
1766 Twin Towers East
Atlanta, GA 30334
404/ 656-0643

Also:
Alternative Schools: Dr. Cindy Blakeley; 404/657-4122
Family Connection: Marian Gamble; 404/527-7594

NEW YORK

Despite great diversity in its enrollment and high-poverty areas, New York State is among the highest-performing states in terms of preventing dropouts, as well as among those states showing improvement over time. From 1993 to 1997, the event dropout rate decreased significantly, from 4 percent to 3 percent.

New York also is one of the states that does not conform to the NCES definition because it uses a different time of year to collect data–July 1 to June 30 of the next year. Basic Education Data System forms are mailed to every public school in September, asking for the previous year's dropouts by grade level and racial/ethnic background. If the rate varies by more than 20 percent from the previous year, the state education department contacts the school to confirm the data, according to Peter Caruso, who collects the statistics on dropouts.

The state has been using the summer calendar date since 1968 and is unlikely to change it to conform to the NCES definition, Caruso says, but the state's data will now be included in national dropout rates because of the decision by NCES that the calendar difference will not substantially change overall rates.

Some of the types of programs used by local districts to prevent students from dropping out have been in place for decades and tend to be customary, such as extended learning time and smaller school environments. Districts design efforts to focus "on whatever they believe the problems to be," according to Carl Friedman of the Comprehensive Health and Pupil Services Team in the state education department. "If the problems deal with diversity, that's what their training should emphasize, but if they decide the problem is reading skills, training on diversity will not do that much good."

What has changed in recent years at the state and district levels is the emphasis on compre-hensive support to keep students in school. Friedman's team covers "everything in and around instruction," and its services for teachers, schools and districts focuses on strategic planning that enables separate initiatives to work together.

Using a Centers for Disease Control model, the team provides professional development and resources that broadly measure a healthy environment for teaching and learning including emotional, physical, and other factors. "We try to get people to adjust to the idea, for example, that discipline should have healthy consequences," Friedman explains. His team members help educators collect and analyze data to measure risk factors that influence decisions to drop out of school such as over-crowded classrooms and schools and attendance issues. Also, instead of just doing the same thing every year, the training provided by the state helps districts and schools evaluate the effects of initiatives such as schools within schools.

"The data ought to measure if change is occurring," says Friedman, and discourage grantmaking from developing "fiefdoms."   The nature of grants have not changed in recent years, he adds, but "the total look has."

CONTACT:

Carl Friedman
Comprehensive Health and Pupil Services Team
New York State Department of Education
318-M Education Building
Albany, NY 12234
518/486-6090

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- States are using alternative learning environments as a strategy to prevent students from dropping out, but find they also need to invest in professional development tailored to the needs of these alternatives. The Mathematica study points out that the choice of teachers for alternative settings was more important than the choice of the curriculum. Teachers in these schools, it said, must be comfortable holding high expectations for students accustomed to failure.

- Some states start dropout prevention efforts earlier than high school, and effectively use a research base to help improve reading skills among middle-grades students.

- States need data beyond raw figures for dropouts in order to design appropriate strategies to prevent students from dropping out. Ray Morley of Iowa, for example, seeks research on how to counteract the impact of poverty on students through dropout prevention initiatives. New York City suspects a recent increase in its dropout rate can be attributed primarily to a tight labor market that lures students away from school, but there are no data yet to support this contention (nor an alternative explanation–that high-stakes testing is causing the increase). Hispanic dropout rates are stubbornly high and may be inappropriately attributed to cultural differences when data show that Hispanics are more likely to be behind their age cohort in school and to be suspended from school than other ethnic/racial groups. Both of these situations contribute to decisions to drop out of school.

Upcoming Goals Panel Events and Products

September 19, 2000 | Governors Tommy Thompson (R-WI) and Paul Patton (D-KY) host an NEGP Field Hearing in Atlanta, Georgia, at the Grady High School on new school structures to help all students achieve at high levels.

October 2, 2000 | Governor Tommy Thompson hosts an NEGP Field Hearing in Chicago, Illinois on the use of data and reporting and how these tools can help all students achieve at high levels.